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ABSTRACT

This student guide for a program focusing on how parents influence the development of self-worth and security in children points out that, even when their parents love them, children may be getting a different message, and suggests special things parents can do to help their children feel loved. Designed around a magazine format to allow maximum flexibility to different groups using the materials, the guide is divided into seven sections: (1) an overview of the theme and contents; (2) a summary of the major learnings of the theme; (3) feature articles containing the major content and including practical suggestions for parents; (4) a film review section which includes a synopsis of the accompanying film program and a related discussion question; (5) three activities aimed at both individual and group participation; (6) a selection of field activities, discussion questions, and research topics designed to reinforce the ideas presented in the articles and meet the needs of a wide variety of classroom groups; and (7) a bibliography for further reading on the theme. (Author/JEG)

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LOVING CHILDREN: GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

I Love You When You're Good

Student Guide

MICROFICHE ONLY

Anne Rouse

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footsteps

A world to be born under your footsteps...
St.-John Perse

FROM THE EDITORS

All parents want their children to like and respect themselves. This feeling of self-worth is essential for children to become all they could be. It gives them the security they need to lead full lives and to love and respect others.

This booklet talks about how parents influence the development of self-worth and security in children. You will learn that even when their parents love them, children may be getting a different message. You will see that there are special things parents can do to help their children feel loved.

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THE BIG IDEAS

- A sense of self-worth helps children lead productive lives and form rewarding relationships with others.
- Children feel secure about themselves when they are valued and accepted for what they are.
- It is largely through the quality of the relationship with their parents that children build a sense of worth.

"I love you,"
said a great mother.
"I love you for what you are
knowing so well what you are..."

— From "Mother and Child"
Carl Sandburg
Wind Song
(New York: Harcourt
Brace Jovanovich, 1960

A VALUABLE MESSAGE

Have you ever had one of those days when you just wanted to crawl under the sheets and never come out? When everything went wrong and you thought no one appreciated you?

We all have such days. Fortunately, there are also days when we love the world and the world loves us. On these days everything goes right and everyone seems to understand.

Depending on the day, then, our feelings about ourselves go up and down a notch or two. But in general, we all have a basic sense of self-worth. This is called our **SELF-ESTEEM**.

Few things are more important in determining what we become than our self-esteem. Our feelings about our worth are the very core of our being. They determine how **SECURE** we feel. They affect not only our mental health, but also:

what friends we choose and how well we get along with them,
how productive we are in school and on the job, and
how satisfied we are with ourselves and others.

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It's easy to pick out children who don't feel good about themselves from those who do. Children with low self-esteem act very differently from those with a strong sense of worth. Some withdraw from other people and experiences:

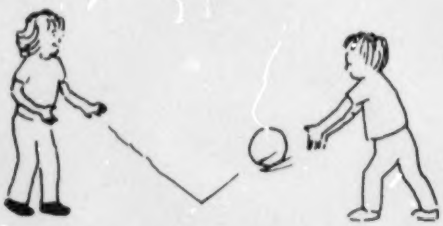
Ellen is very shy. She doesn't think people like her, so she stays away from other children on the playground. Ellen is afraid to try new things. She's scared that people will like her even less if she does something wrong. Failure hurts her much more deeply than it does other children.

Other children who feel insecure defend themselves against this feeling in a more aggressive way:

Craig spends a lot of time trying to convince himself and others of his worth. He is mean to other children because he thinks people care about them more than him. He teases them about their mistakes to make himself seem more important. He tries to call attention to himself by being loud and bossy. He tries to convince himself and others of his worth by bragging and bullying.

Children who feel good about themselves, on the other hand, are free to be themselves:

Joanna is open and alive. She doesn't have to waste time proving her worth — she knows she is lovable. Instead, she uses her energies on more rewarding tasks — such as making friends and playing peacefully with them. Joanna isn't afraid to try out her wings. She has learned that even if she fails, people will still like and respect her. Because she has had so many good experiences with people, she expects to get along with others. And so she does.



Whether children develop a sense of worth that is low, like Ellen and Craig, or high, like Joanna, depends on many things. One of the most important is whether or not they have felt valued and cared for by other people:

Children value themselves to the degree they feel valued by others.

In their young years, children learn about their worth mainly from their parents. It is up to parents to get across to children the message that they are valued and accepted.

CROSSED WIRES

> The supreme happiness in life is the knowledge that we are loved.
>
> — *Victor Hugo*

Most parents love their children.

But not all children feel loved.

Even when their parents love them, some children think they're just a bother. Others learn that their parents care about them only when they behave in certain ways.

Not all children are lucky enough to know that whatever they say or do, their parents care.

Clearly, then, *being* loved is not the same as *feeling* loved. It's not enough for parents to love their children. They have to be sure their children know that, too. It's the child's feeling about being loved that will affect his or her future development:

> Children feel valued when their parents' love is **UNCONDITIONAL** — when it has no strings attached.

Security is knowing you're loved.

Parents need to express their love to children in ways that children understand. Parents may scrimp and save to buy a bigger and better home for their children. But children don't see such an act as a reflection of their parents' love.

Instead, simple, everyday things tell children whether or not their parents value them. A shared experience, a warm smile, a gentle touch and a kind word spell "I love you" to a child.

In the same way, day-to-day happenings can tell children they're not valued very highly. Unintentionally, parents' words and actions can say to children that their parents don't care.

Children start getting messages about their worth from the first moment of life. Even young babies, through the way their parents handle them, can learn either: "I am worth a lot of tender loving care" or "I'm just in the way." Repeated daily experiences at home and outside either change or deepen these feelings.

Let's compare how two parents interact with their children to see how the things they say and do might look from a child's point of view.

Parent #1

It's time for Mrs. McDonald to feed 6-month-old Douggie. She hopes it won't take as long as usual. She can't wait for the day when Douggie can feed himself. Because Douggie eats so slowly, Mrs. McDonald usually tries to do something else while she's feeding him. She holds a book on her lap and reads, for example, or makes phone calls. She doesn't notice Douggie's coos of satisfaction. She only responds when he cries or chokes on his food.

Barbie has just managed to tie her shoelaces by herself for the first time, and she calls to her mother to watch. "Good girl," say Mrs. McDonald. "That's the kind of little girl Daddy and I like." Mrs. McDonald thinks she has come upon the secret of bringing up children. When her children are good, she rewards them with her love. When they are bad, she takes it away.

Barbie just knocked over her mother's plants as she was climbing up to look out of the window. "You naughty girl," says Mrs. McDonald. "How could you be so clumsy?" Mrs. McDonald is frowning, and the tone of her voice is very angry. She sends Barbie up to her room. Barbie realizes with a sinking feeling that she's done it again. She wishes that she weren't such a bad girl. Now her mother will barely speak to her for the rest of the day.

Parent #2

Betty Sue's cry tells Mr. Washington that it's time to change her diaper. Mr. Washington has come to look forward to these opportunities to be close to his baby and make her more comfortable. He never rushes through these rituals. He takes his time, stopping to play with Betty Sue's toes and tickle her under the chin. He talks and sings. When she gurgles, he gurgles back. Sometimes he plays peek-a-boo with her clean diaper. And usually he just can't resist giving her a big, fat kiss.

When Mr. Washington's 3-year-old son helps him clear the table after dinner, Mr. Washington gives him a special hug. "I really appreciate your help," he says. "Work gets done a lot faster when you help." Joe warms up to his Dad's words. They are a reminder of the pride and joy his Dad always seems to feel toward him. Mr. Washington is generous with hugs and kind words. Rarely a day goes by that Joe doesn't learn how much his father loves him.

Joe just pinched Betty Sue to see what would happen, and Betty Sue is telling everyone loudly and clearly how she feels. Mr. Washington says firmly: "Joe, don't do that to your little sister. Pinching hurts." Putting his arm around Joe he says: "I love Betty Sue just like I love you, and I don't want to see either of you hurt."

If parents are always in a hurry when they take care of their children, children could learn that their parents don't think they are important. If parents express their love only under certain conditions, children may learn that they are loved — IF they obey, or IF they don't wet the bed, or IF they don't make any mistakes. If children keep hearing that they are bad, they may begin to believe it.

And, if children receive many such messages, they may begin to think that their parents aren't glad to have them.

Love Letters

Let your love be like the misty rain,
coming softly, but flooding the river.
— *Proverb from Madagascar*

Children need love and affection in large doses. In fact, it's probably safe to say that children can't get too much love:

Children need to feel that their parents wouldn't trade them in for anyone else in the world.

To show their love and get their children's self-esteem off to a good start, parents can:

FIND THE TIME TO GIVE CHILDREN SPECIAL ATTENTION

Parents lead busy lives. It's all too easy for children's needs to get lost in the midst of shopping lists, dentist appointments, and the weekly wash. That's why it's important for parents to find or make time when they can focus just on their children — when they can talk to their children, listen to them, and show interest in their activities. This may mean putting down the iron or paint brush to take a close look at the caterpillar Johnny just found. Or, it could mean scheduling a walk with Sally at the end of the day just to talk.

EXPRESS AFFECTION OFTEN THROUGH PHYSICAL CONTACT

Physical affection is a basic human need. It's also one of the languages children understand best. Babies thrive on cuddles and caresses. As children get older, parents can offer hugs, kisses, an arm over the shoulder, or a pat on the back. Sometimes the right words are hard to find, but a gentle hug says it all.

TREAT CHILDREN WITH THE SAME RESPECT AS ADULTS

Too often we take children for granted. We have two sets of manners: one for adults, and another for children. We embarrass children by scolding or criticizing them in front of others. We get so involved in a conversation we forget to include children. We make them wait for us longer than we would make an adult wait. Children are no less sensitive than adults. They deserve equal respect.

TELL CHILDREN FROM TIME TO TIME THEY'RE LOVED

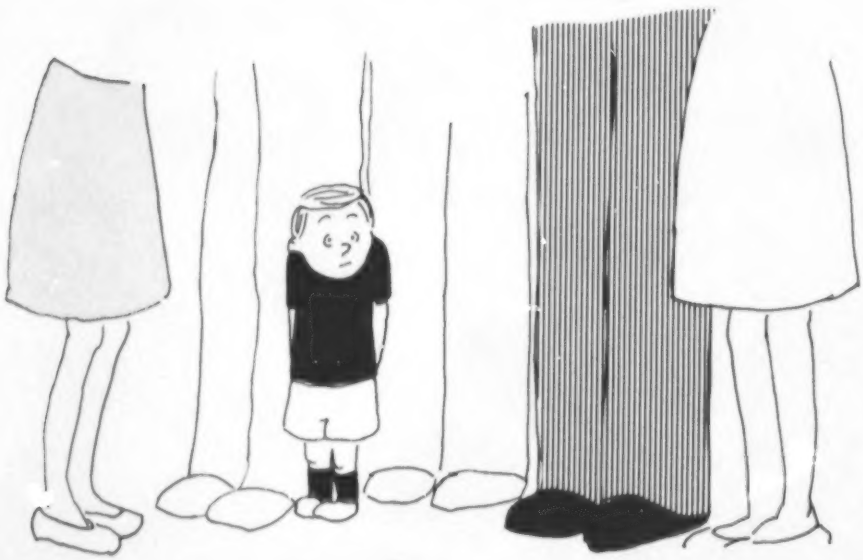
Parents should never assume their children know they're loved and appreciated. Children need to be told these things — again and again. It's also important not to wait until children get good grades or do something well to express these feelings. A spontaneous "It's sure nice to have you around" can give children's self-esteem a healthy boost.

RESPOND TO CHILDREN'S MISBEHAVIORS WITH PATIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING

When children spill their milk for the third time in a row, or hit their best friend over the head with a toy shovel, it's easy to treat them like criminals. Instead, though, parents should try to see children for what they are: young human beings who need help from grown-ups in controlling their bodies and emotions.

RESPECT CHILDREN'S FEELINGS AND ABILITIES

Because of their small size, we sometimes forget that children are people too. They have a right to privacy, to ownership, and to feelings of their own. We may have to remind ourselves not to carry children when they can get there on their own steam, not to push and pull children when we are in a hurry. We may have to stop ourselves from speaking for children when they can do this for themselves: "Juanita thinks your present is lovely, Carlos."



This doesn't mean that if parents ever lose their temper they've ruined their children forever. Hurrying through a feeding now and then won't cause permanent damage. Children are flexible and mend well. They don't need perfect parents. Ordinary people will do.

In the same way, though, just kissing children or saying "I love you" isn't enough to convince children that they are lovable. What counts is the overall climate in the home. If it is loving and respected, then slowly but surely, children will learn that they are valued:

just the way they are,
just because they are,
no if's, and's, or but's.

FILM REVIEW SECTION

I Love You When You're Good

Lucy (a friend of Cindy's) and her daughter Patty are staying with the Sanchez family. Their visit causes Maggie and Joe Sanchez to take a closer look at their relationship with their own daughter, Christina.

Joe thinks Lucy is a secure woman and a good mother. He is impressed by Patty's good manners and obedience. He wishes Christina were more like Patty, and accuses Maggie of spoiling Christina. Maggie, on the other hand, sees Patty as a frightened child who is becoming as insecure as her mother. She thinks that showing love and approval only when a child is good is a terrible way to raise a child.

When Lucy is arrested in a drug raid, Joe sees that Maggie was right: Lucy is constantly seeking the approval of others. He comes home and reflects on what has occurred.

WHAT WAS LUCY TEACHING PATTY ABOUT HERSELF?

ACTIVITY PAGES

activity #1
THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT

Think about the kinds of things that parents and other people do to make you feel good, and the things that make you feel bad. Write a short story about a day in the life of a small child. Include incidents that might help build the child's self-esteem, and things that could lower it. How does the child feel by the end of the day?

activity #2
IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT

It's not just parents' words that tell children whether or not they are valued. Body language also says a lot. Even the words "I love you" can mean "I don't love you" if they are said with impatience, sarcasm, or anger.

With your classmates, pretend you are saying each of the following things to a child.

Repeat each statement at least 3 different ways. In each case, have your classmates observe you and describe:

the expression on your face
the tone in your voice
the position and movement of your body
your gestures.

What do these things tell people about your feelings? How might a child feel who heard and watched you say these things?

activity #3
WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

In each of the situations below, describe how you think the parent's words and behavior made the child feel about his or her value. What would you have done in each situation?

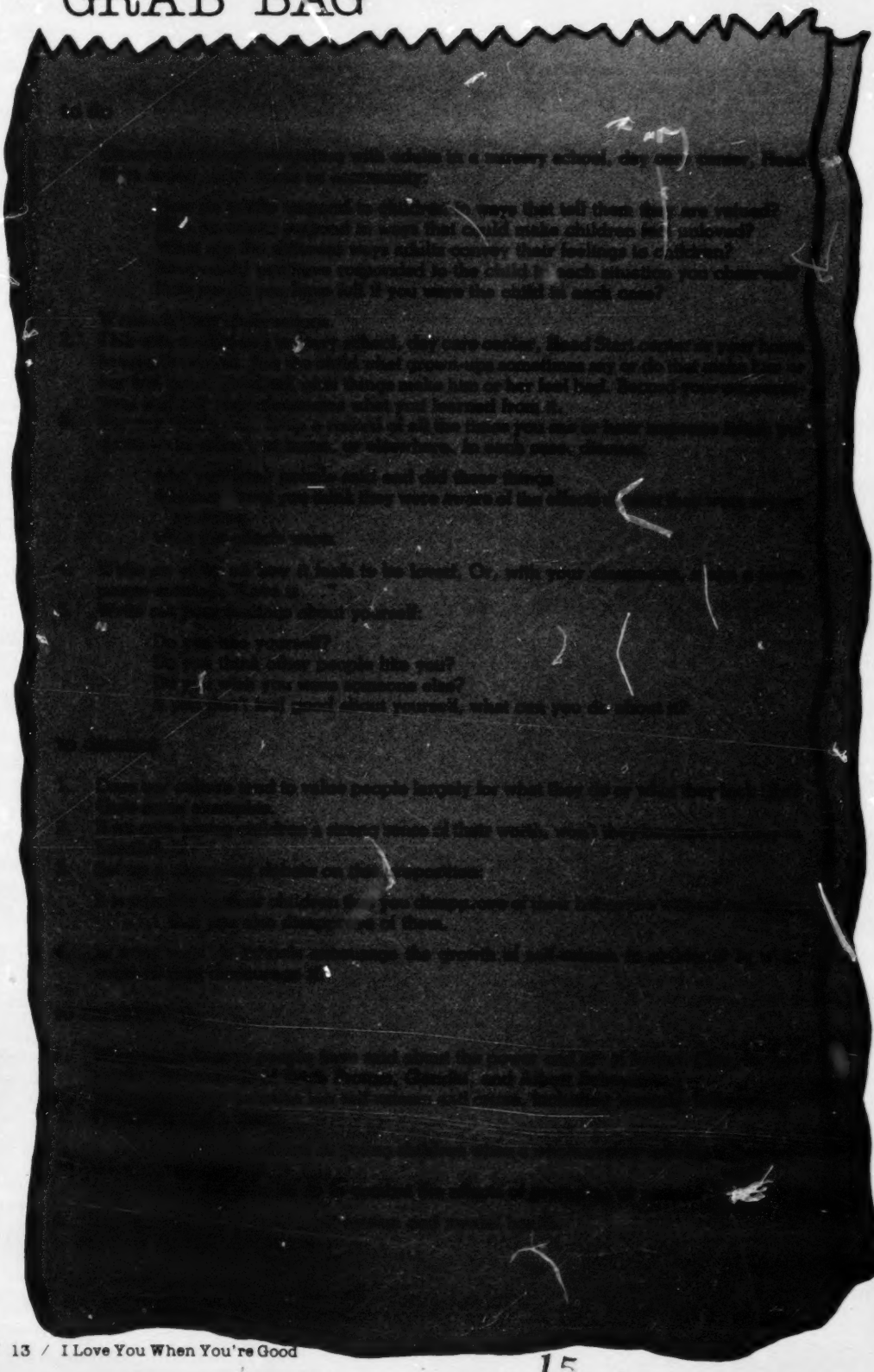
Mr. Vaughn is dressing 2-year-old Ricky. "Hurry up," he says. "I haven't got all day." Ricky wants to button his sweater himself, but Mr. Vaughn won't let him. "You're too slow," he says. "I don't have time to wait for you."

4-year-old Nancy's baby brother has just broken Nancy's favorite doll, and Nancy is still angry and upset. Nancy's mother promises to buy her a new doll, but Nancy is still angry. "Stop your fussing," says Mrs. Barry finally. "Nobody likes an unpleasant child."

Mr. Riley has taken 3-year-old Sammy shopping with him. Sammy is having trouble keeping up with his father's pace, but refuses to be carried. Reluctantly, Mr. Riley lets Sammy walk. Then, when Sammy stops to look in a toy store window, Mr. Riley loses his patience. He takes Sammy by the arm, and starts pulling him along.

3-year-old Annie has called her mother out to the back yard to look at the castle she just built. On the way over to the sandbox Mrs. Payne's neighbor calls to her. Mrs. Payne goes over to talk to the neighbor. She talks to her for the next 15 minutes, despite Annie's calls to "come look at this."

GRAB BAG



BOOK BROWSING

Here are some books that contain more information on...

...how parents affect children's self-esteem

Peoplemaking. Virginia Satir. Palo Alto, California: Science and Behavior Books, 1972. (paperback)

Your Child's Self-Esteem. Dorothy Corkille Briggs. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1970. (paperback)

...the power and importance of love

The Art of Loving. Erich Fromm. New York: Bantam Books, 1956. (paperback)

The Roots of Love. Helene S. Arnstein. New York: Bantam Books, 1975. (paperback)

...the effects of prejudice on self-esteem

Black Child Care. James P. Comer, M.D. and Alvin Poussaint, M.D. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975. (paperback)

Black Rage. W. H. Grier and P. H. Cobbs. New York: Basic Books, 1968. (paperback)

Race Awareness in Young Children. Mary Ellen Goodman. New York: Macmillan, 1964. (paperback)

Towards the Elimination of Racism. Phyllis A. Katz, ed. New York: British Book Center, 1976. (paperback)

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